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## Violence and Resistance to the State: Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explains the meaning and significance of violence in Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1908) through an examination of three distinctions that structure the book. First between the proletarian strike and the merely political strike; second between myth and utopia; third between violence and force. The paper looks to Sorel's earlier and later writings, and to the strike actions unfolding around him, to argue that violence was a relatively novel topic for Sorel, and in the *Reflections* it is connected to an understanding of the State that comes to define it.

On March 10th 1906 at 5:30am, the usual shift of 1,665 workers entered the pits at the Courrières mine, one of the largest in the Pas-de-Calais region of northern France. Ninety minutes later, the mine's ambient coal dust ignited. The resulting explosion killed more than a thousand people over 110 kilometers of tunnel, some at a depth of 300 meters.<sup>1</sup> As survivors began to climb out of the pits, a hastily mobilized line of police confronted practically the whole population of the nearby towns. They had felt the explosion in their homes and come running. Damage to cages and the still-dangerous conditions underground meant that the work of recovery was slow. A cold spring rain fell on the corpses of sons, husbands, and brothers, many of them grotesquely mutilated, hauled up in piles from the wrecked mine. Hope for more survivors was in a few days given up by the state engineers who had rapidly taken charge of the disaster response, as was legally mandated.

A large regional strike followed, which would last for months. Tens of thousands of miners sought to control of the undamaged pit-heads and keep production shut down. A number of houses in Lieven were wrecked, including that belonging to the director of the owners' Society of Mines. By mid-April, at the strike's peak, more than 50,000 soldiers and additional gendarmes had been deployed to the region. There were relatively few deaths. One striker was killed in an altercation with a worker who wished to return to work. One soldier was struck in the head with a brick and killed. The army kept no record of how many strikers were injured, but it seems that the forces of order killed no one. Commanding officers and civilian authorities had worked

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<sup>1</sup>Robert G. Neville, "The Courrières Colliery Disaster, 1906," *Journal of Contemporary History* 13, no. 1 (1978): 33–52.

hard in the years since the notorious events at Fourmies—nine dead and more than 30 wounded—to avoid civilian deaths at the hands of the army.<sup>2</sup> In the face of such an extraordinary military deployment, as well as interior minister Georges Clemenceau's decisive but at best quasi-legal use of police power against the workers' more radical leaders in the run-up to May 1st, the strike in the Pas-de-Calais failed.

Georges Sorel was writing the closing pages of what would become his best known book, *Reflections on Violence*, against the backdrop of that strike. Sorel tells us that his book is meant to orient future discussions of socialism around “the conditions that allow the development of specifically proletarian powers, which is to say, violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike.” Indeed—and this is the final sentence of the book—“it is to violence that socialism owes the elevated moral values through which it brings salvation to the modern world” (251).<sup>3</sup> The goal of this paper is to explain what Sorel meant by those lines. That explanation is going to come through an examination of three distinctions that structure Sorel's problematic in the *Reflections*. First between the proletarian or revolutionary strike and the merely political strike; second between myth and utopia; third—and this is my central concern—between violence and force. Although the focus of this essay is on the text of the *Reflections* as a work of theory, it will be crucial for us to bear in mind, at different points, the concrete struggles going on, as it were, outside Sorel's window.

There has recently been a resurgence of interest in Sorel among scholars writing in English. This builds on a whole generation of archival work from the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship can usefully be differentiated in terms of how it contextualizes Sorel. George Ciccariello-Maher puts Sorel into a revolutionary tradition, rather than a Marxist one, that stretches from Sorel through Frantz Fanon and to Enrique Dussel in the present. Historian Tommaso Giordani, in contrast, sees Sorel as fundamentally working in and through the Marxist categories available to him at the turn of the century. Kevin Duong, finally, places Sorel in a longer and specifically French tradition of wrestling with the relationship between post-Revolutionary democracy and violence.<sup>5</sup> Apart from studies specifically about Sorel, scholars including Alex Gourevitch and, in a more liberalizing mode, Elizabeth Anderson, have drawn attention to the workplace as political terrain in a way that can help us to understand the stakes of Sorel's

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<sup>2</sup>On the deployment in the Pas-de-Calais from the perspective of the forces of order, see Odile Roynette-Gland, “L'armée dans la bataille sociale: Maintien de l'ordre et grèves ouvrières dans le Nord de la France (1871–1906),” *Le Mouvement Social*, no. 179 (1997): 58.

<sup>3</sup>All parenthetical references refer to Georges Sorel and Jeremy Jennings, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup>Much of this generation of French scholarship is represented in the *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, subsequently renamed *Mil neuf cent*. However, see especially Shlomo Sand, *L'illusion du politique: Georges Sorel et le débat intellectuel 1900* (Paris: Découverte, 1985). And the more recent, Willy Gianinazzi, *Naissance du mythe moderne: Georges Sorel et la crise de la pensée savante, 1889–1914* (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2006). In English from that earlier period, see especially Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political & Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). For one recent evaluation of that scholarship, see the introduction to Georges Sorel, Eric Brandom, and Tommaso Giordani, *Georges Sorel's Study on Vico: Translation, Edition, and Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>George Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Tommaso Giordani, “The Uncertainties of Action: Agency, Capitalism, and Class in the Thought of Georges Sorel” (European University Institute, 2015); Kevin Duong, *The Virtues of Violence: Democracy Against Disintegration in Modern France* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

writing.<sup>6</sup> This paper argues that the best framework within which to make sense of Sorel's political and social thought is liberalism understood as a translation for modern social conditions of republican ideas of liberty.

Sorel's deepest challenge to us is to claim that the realm of freedom will be found *neither* in the collective or political *nor* in the individual or intimate, but rather in the project of collective production. There are dimensions of this demand that fit into Marxist and other socialist, but also liberal and republican traditions of political thought. Sorel is after all, famously, not easy to categorize. But he was certainly a thinker of emancipation, and he was also, certainly, a thinker of emancipation in modernity, which meant for him capitalism, representative government, and mass society. This is, on one level, simply a refusal to accept either the subsumption of the economic into "civil society" or "the social," or its containment into merely a set of technical problems to resolve. Production is not just, for Sorel, something that has a politics, or a setting for politics, but rather potentially at least the source of new and revolutionary values that are egalitarian, collective, and emancipatory. Sorel's praise of violence enlightened by the general strike began as the observation of a sort of collective self-defense of nascent proletarian civilization in the enforcement of pluralism; it slid into praise of anything that seemed exterior or opposed to the Republican state. The valuable elements of Sorel's thinking emerge most clearly against the backdrop of this slide into reducing emancipation to resistance, and resistance itself to an individual posture, which we can see take place over the course of the *Reflections*.

Sorel wrote and published voluminously and on a wide range of topics from just before his early retirement from the civil service in 1892 up to his death in 1922. H. Stuart Hughes was not wrong to call his mind a "windy crossroads through which passed the doctrines of the age."<sup>7</sup> While Sorel had been writing in one way or another about labor actions and toward what would be his idea of myth since the early 1890s, violence as such was not one of his major topics of interest until the period of the *Reflections*. Part of the argument here is that this text has been so productive in part because the transformation Sorel's thinking underwent in the writing of it rendered the final text available in contradictory ways. This is evident in its reception.<sup>8</sup> There can be no question here of a whole biographical treatment, but before confronting the *Reflections* directly we need to understand a bit about Sorel's preoccupations and arguments leading up to 1905. This will clarify both the terms of Sorel's Marxism and the nature of the claims I am making here about liberalism.

## I

In 1893, Sorel published a letter in the *Revue philosophique*—the major journal of professional philosophy in France at the time—defending Karl Marx against Gabriel

<sup>6</sup>Alex Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," *Political Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013); Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup>H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 161.

<sup>8</sup>See Eric Brandom, "Violence in Translation: Georges Sorel, Liberalism and Totalitarianism from Weimar to Woodstock," *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 4 (2017): 733–763.

Tarde's lazy misreading.<sup>9</sup> Sorel had been trained as an engineer. He had a solid background in the natural sciences and came to Marx in part through problems raised by the epistemology of the social sciences. His early Marxist essays thus need to be read in terms of the French tradition of philosophy of science, as well as the debates that stand at the beginning of modern French sociology between Tarde and Emile Durkheim. Sorel published in professional journals like the *RP*, but also in *Ere nouvelle*, the first journal explicitly dedicated to theoretical Marxism in France. He is an important figure, therefore, in that generation's reception of Marxism.<sup>10</sup>

Sorel dedicated himself to Marxism at a moment—the 1890s, just after the death of Engels—when it was particularly difficult to say what that meant. The 1890s saw the transformation of socialism from a fringe phenomenon in France into a significant part of mainstream political life. This transformation was aided by violence during strikes. In the wake of the famous fusillade at Fourmies in 1891, Paul Lafargue, son-in-law to Karl Marx, became the first Marxist elected to the chamber of deputies in the Third Republic.<sup>11</sup> Over the next decade, socialists won elections again and again in the wake of labor conflict. But the electoral realm had its own dynamic and its own demands. In 1898 socialists did poorly in Paris in part because, since there was no central coordinating organization, too many had run at once.<sup>12</sup>

Sorel remained a commentator and a theorist of socialism. He was not initially hostile to parliamentary socialism, although from the beginning he was more interested in worker organizations and strike actions than in a unified political party. From 1895 to 1898 he helped to edit and himself published mainly in *Devenir sociale*, a journal of theoretical Marxism that was official enough to include work from Karl Kautsky, Antonio Labriola, and Gyorg Pleckhanov. However, in 1898–1899 Sorel broke with what was just in the process of becoming orthodox Marxism by welcoming Eduard Bernstein's corrections of Marxist political economy. Sorel's revisionism included a rejection of the labor theory of value, as well as of the predictive value of Marx's analysis of capital. No objective laws of economic development pre-ordained the creation of a unified proletariat or any kind of final crisis for capitalism. At first he also welcomed the reformist political implications of Bernstein's arguments—an emphasis on legality and democratic engagement, as well as a more generally melioristic approach. As Sorel wrote, once society is no longer understood as a mechanically determined system, "it will no longer be a question of changing the whole organization of society ... one will rather search for the means to eliminate a bad situation, remaining within the principles of the law."<sup>13</sup> Sorel also encouraged socialists to take the side of Alfred Dreyfus, the army officer falsely accused of treason by antisemitic fellow officers, when that affair erupted. Sorel, then, in 1900, was a Dreyfusard, a reformist socialist, in favor

<sup>9</sup>Sorel, Georges. "Science et Socialisme," *Revue Philosophique* 35 (May 1893): 561.

<sup>10</sup>On the earlier phases of this reception, see Julia Nicholls, *Revolutionary Thought After the Paris Commune, 1871–1885* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). On a case relevant to Sorel, Christophe Prochasson, "Sur La Réception Du Marxisme En France; Le Cas Andler (1890–1920)," *Revue de Synthèse* 110, no. 1 (1989): 85–108.

<sup>11</sup>On Lafargue, see Leslie Derfler, *Paul Lafargue and the Flowering of French Socialism, 1882–1911* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup>The outstanding introductory treatment of this period of socialist political development remains Madeleine Réberieux, "Le socialisme français de 1871–1914." In Jacques Droz, *Histoire générale du socialisme (2): De 1875 à 1918* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1983), 133–237.

<sup>13</sup>Georges Sorel, *Introduction à l'économie moderne* (Paris: Jacques, 1903), 301.

of participation in the government, defense of Republican legality, and increasingly well-connected to mainstream Parisian intellectual life.<sup>14</sup>

Starting in 1903, he moved in a radical direction. The reasons for this were opaque to many even at the time. It has been suggested that Sorel simply became disenchanted with the Dreyfusards, but this is overly psychologizing. Charles Péguy's lament about the descent of Dreyfusard *mystique* into *politique* has been cited as though it were an explanation, rather than a metapolitical statement drawn from a shared experience. Sorel had been happy in 1899 for Alexandre Millerand to join a cabinet of Republican defense, but he did not take very seriously the more extreme or sensationalist threats to the Republic. Paul Déroulède's attempted coup in 1899, for instance, was not a grave threat to the Republic, just a farce.

The most important factor in Sorel's anti-republican turn was the resurgence of anti-clericalism and the growing assertiveness of secularizing Republicans within the state. For Sorel, the existence of the Church as a quasi-autonomous institution competing on several fronts with Republicanism – both within and for the state – was a positive good. This was, on Sorel's part, a commitment to liberal pluralism. He watched in horror as Emile Combes shut down thousands of religious schools, and the Chamber of Deputies debated laws that would bar anyone who had ever taken religious vows, no matter what they subsequently did or said, from teaching, no matter what they taught. "There can be no doubt," Sorel wrote, "that the present campaign of anticlericalism hides... a monstrous attempt on the part of the State to take in hand consciences and to shape the new generations with a view to a servitude founded on hazy ideology."<sup>15</sup> The extension of state control in the name of *laïcité* over the realm of instruction and public religiosity drove Sorel into intransigent scissionism. Under the influence of the "spectacle," as Sorel called it, of the socialists falling into line behind the high priests of the Republic to tighten the bourgeois state's ideological control over the schools, he came to believe that the autonomy he had advocated for worker institutions all along required a total break with the state and with other classes.<sup>16</sup> Thus pluralist liberalism passed toward intransigence and separatism.

The internal politics of socialism also suggested that it had been fully captured by electoralism. In 1905 Jean Jaurès succeeded in bringing together most, if not quite all, of the French socialists into the SFIO. Sorel's *Reflections* can be seen as a response to this political unification that was, certainly, dominated by the logic of parliamentary participation. The *Reflections* are thus of a moment with the syndicalist "Charte d'Amiens," itself most directly a response to Guesdist attempts to subordinate the CGT to political direction. The "Charte" declared that the CGT would engage in "the work of everyday demands" with an eye to coordination of all worker struggles, but that this was only part of the syndicalist task. The CGT also prepared for "integral emancipation, which cannot be achieved except through expropriation of capitalists."

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<sup>14</sup>On this moment in Sorel's trajectory, see Christophe Prochasson, "Sur l'environnement intellectuel de Georges Sorel: L'École des Hautes Études Sociales (1899–1911)," *Cahiers Georges Sorel* 3 (1985): 16–38.

<sup>15</sup>Georges Sorel, "Tavernier – La religion nouvelle," *Revue générale de bibliographie française* 3, no. 22 (1905), 168.

<sup>16</sup>On socialists and the 1905 separation of church and state, see Rémi Fabre, "Une Séparation Révolutionnaire? Allard et Vaillant ... Les Ultras de La Commission Briand," *Cahiers Jaurès* 175–176 (2005): 33–83.

The means of this emancipation was the general strike. The syndicat, today “a resistance group will be, in the future, the group of production and distribution, basis of social reorganization.”<sup>17</sup>

Sorel’s 1898 “L’Avenir socialiste des syndicats” had not mentioned the general strike as a mechanism of change, but otherwise Sorel had long committed himself to this line. Proletarian institutions must take their juridical and moral principles from the logic of production itself—understood as distinct from bourgeois-dominated distribution and property relations. The workers must be intransigent in their dealings with the capitalists, and sustain their scission from bourgeois society by violence if necessary—this is the heroic moment of revolutionary syndicalism. The only way to avoid the creation of a dictatorship *in the name of* the proletariat—that is, dominated by and in the interests of socialist politicians of the SFIO rather than actual workers—was to meet, as Sorel wrote, “with black ingratitude” (77) every concession offered by employers or by the state. Sorel’s syndicalism had not changed, so much as his evaluation of the possibilities and dangers of the larger political situation. So much for the moderate, legalistic, revisionist Marxism of a few years earlier.

## II

The first chapter of what would become the *Reflections* appeared in Italian in October 1905, under the title “Class Struggle and Violence.”<sup>18</sup> Sorel saw a four-cornered struggle: the workers, the bosses, socialist politicians, the armed state. Democratic pressure (meaning both electoral and more diffusely social) on the agents of the state made them reluctant to use all the police and military powers at their disposal, which the bosses may or may not have wanted in any case. The old Blanquist idea that the state could be seized in a quasi-military uprising, Sorel regarded as simply outmoded (66). Given that, was violence really always just an opportunity for more or less skillful manipulation by demagogic politicians? Would the socialist party use the threat of violence, as for instance the Irish nationalist Parnell did against the English, to extort concessions from their political opponents (66–67)? The aim of the first chapters of the *Reflections* is to show that, in fact, violence in the context of labor conflict takes on special meaning.

Sorel sets out to understand the general strike in the spirit of Marx writing on the struggle for the 8-hour day. But he begins by distinguishing between two kinds of general strikes. The political general strike is negatively connoted. The revolutionary general strike is positively connoted. A political general strike is one that is called and orchestrated by a politician for some purpose. A revolutionary strike is one that

<sup>17</sup>Jacques Julliard, “La charte d’Amiens, cent ans après,” *Mil neuf cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* 24, no. 1 (2006) : 5–40.

<sup>18</sup>An invaluable tool for tracking Sorel’s writings at different moments is Shlomo Sand’s bibliography in the important collection Jacques Julliard and Shlomo Sand, eds., *Georges Sorel en son temps*, (Paris: Seuil, 1985). Like most of Sorel’s writings, the *Reflections* appeared first in a periodical. The chapters that would ultimately be the *Reflections* were published first in the biweekly Italian syndicalist journal, *Divenire sociale*, starting in October 1905, appearing regularly until April 1906; similar but not identical texts were published in French in *Mouvement socialiste* from January to June 1906. Only the next year did Daniel Halévy convince Sorel to bring the articles together into a book – to which Sorel added the “Letter to Halévy” as an introduction for its appearance in early 1908. New editions appeared across Sorel’s lifetime, including in 1920 with a new appendix in defense of Lenin.

escapes any control. If a political strike is successful, it succeeds only in strengthening the politician who called it and, therefore, the state. A revolutionary strike is successful when the state is weakened and proletarian institutions are strengthened. The distinction turns really on the state, and indeed Sorel identifies the state with the application of means-ends logic to the social realm.

In 1905, the general strike had a long history already. Key for Sorel is the extraordinary legalistic vision put forward by Fernand Pelloutier and Aristide Briand in 1892. Labor unions had only been legal in France since 1884, and Pelloutier's plan was to use the tenuous right to strike, that is entirely peaceful means, as historian Jacques Julliard writes, to "destroy from top to bottom the principle of property and bourgeois legality while conforming strictly to this legality."<sup>19</sup> Sorel had been close to Pelloutier, who died young in 1901, yet Sorel reformulates the general strike in important ways. If total change from the inside out and a new legal order were still the goal, the strike could no longer be organized, could no longer be called at a chosen moment. In fact what Sorel does most particularly is remove the revolutionary general strike from any means-ends calculation—it erupts and, from the perspective of the state, has no direction and signifies only disruption. We can draw a contrast here with the 1909 *Comment nous ferons la révolution*, in which the syndicalist leaders Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget imagined the Revolution that would take place. In that narrative, the workers are always the more clever, always the better prepared, and the strike's logic unfolds directly into the conquest of production.<sup>20</sup> For Sorel, rather, the strike is defensive, negative activity, separated radically from the practical task of production.

For Sorel, the revolutionary general strike is *individuating*. It escapes the logic of political means and ends, just because it is pursued by individuals, as individuals, yet is irreducibly collective. "The revolutionary syndicalists wish to extol the individuality of the life of the producer," and the bourgeois politicians are perfectly right, he goes on, to complain that therefore "they undermine the foundations of the State" (242–43). Sorel says of the proletarian general strike that it "denies not only the government of the capitalist bourgeoisie, but any hierarchy more or less analogous to bourgeois hierarchy." This is not a simple flattening or denial of representative government, but rather its explicit overcoming. The revolution by general strike must solve not only the problems about which liberalism refused to speak—the exploitation of wage labor—but also those about which it was most explicitly concerned: "the partisans of the general strike mean to bring an end to everything that preoccupied the old liberals: the eloquence of tribunes, the manipulation of public opinion, the scheming of political parties."<sup>21</sup> All of this is overcome by rearticulating the individual "I" to the political and social "we." Participants are, we might say now, discursively articulated as autonomous ethical subjects, but proletarian rather than bourgeois. In the revolutionary strike—through the myth—a collective action allows individuals to be autotelic.

<sup>19</sup>Jacques Julliard, *Fernand Pelloutier et les origines du syndicalisme d'action directe* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 67.

<sup>20</sup>Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *Comment nous ferons la révolution* (Paris: Tallandier 1909).

<sup>21</sup>Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1929), 59–60. Text originally published as Georges Sorel, "Le Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire," *Le Mouvement Socialiste* 17, no. 166–167 (1905): 17.



The revolutionary general strike—within which, according to Sorel, all of socialism is contained—is a specific, although historically privileged, instance of myth. Myth is probably the most productively ambiguous of Sorel's terms. It is also the one that has most often been given the dubious honorific “portable social science concept.” Its contrasting negative term, utopia, has had a much more successful career on the left. Sorel had maintained a critical concern with utopia from early on. Already in 1896 Sorel had written that “utopias can be considered anamorphoses of the society” in which they are produced.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, a myth is an image of a society *in becoming*, rather than the distorted self-consciousness of one that already is.<sup>23</sup>

The question of temporality, of imagined futures and given presents is essential here. Sorel tells us that the great task of *Reflections* is “to ask how it is possible to conceive of the transformation of the men of today into the free producers of tomorrow working in workshops where there are no masters. The question must be expressed accurately,” Sorel says, “we pose it not for a world that has already arrived at socialism, but solely for our own time and for the preparation of the transition from one world to the other; if we do not limit the question in this way, we shall find ourselves straying into utopias” (238). Pelloutier's general strike and the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat are both utopias in which a will reaches out into the future to attempt to control events, unable in the end to do anything but reproduce itself. Myth poses a different relation between present and future, an intuitive and creative movement, an unfolding of material conditions that is essentially collective.<sup>24</sup>

Although I want to remain focused on the exposition of these ideas in *Reflections*, it is nonetheless worth pointing out here how Sorel's notion of myth developed in the context of his thinking on the nature of social science and science in general. Science writ large for Sorel, is essentially related to technology. Greek geometry is indissociable from Greek architecture, as Newtonian physics is from early machinery. Science, in this sense, is the creation of determinism in the world. As Sorel had written in 1893, “the machine is a reasoned representation of material forces,” therefore, “to invent a mechanism is to discover a theorem that one represents by means of perceptible sizes ... Mechanical invention differs from science (as it is usually understood) only in the mode of expression.”<sup>25</sup> Social science, however, creates problems. Sorel passed through several phases in his reading of Marx here, assisted by Durkheim, Giambattista Vico, and others. Indeed by 1903 Sorel was paying careful attention to

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<sup>22</sup>Georges Sorel, “La science dans l'éducation,” *Le devenir social* 2 (March 1896): 233.

<sup>23</sup>An example of utopia as anamorphosis is nicely provided by Daniel Halévy's *Histoire de quatre ans, 1997–2001*, published in Péguy's *Cahiers de la quinzaine* in 1903. It is the story of a future in which a technological invention has allowed the cost of production of food to fall to zero. No one needs to work in order to eat. Material feast is spiritual famine. Europe is nearly wiped out by invading Asiatic hordes, and is saved only by a self-isolating aristocratic minority who retain their capacity for self-discipline. Here a story about the future is used very plainly to think, or at least express opinions about, the present.

<sup>24</sup>There are two issues here. One is the temporal working-out of the consequences of violence. Duong reads this, as does Ciccariello-Maher, in Hegelian fashion as a dialectical cunning of violence. It seems to me that Sorel rejects this as really utopian rather than mythic. The goal here is not for the philosopher to know better. Rather, myth is creative, and the process of a creative subject is being described, rather than its outcome prescribed. The aesthetic and creative elements of myth are essential to it. For an interesting comparison between Sorel and Hegel from a scholar of the latter, see the final chapter of David James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel's Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>25</sup>Georges Sorel, *D'Aristote à Marx : L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique*, (Paris: M. Rivière, 1935), 205, 208.

the literary forms employed by Marx in presenting his arguments – the ways in which Marx drew the reader along by showing first one and then another not entirely compatible side of the central questions of political economy. Key here is Sorel's long 1904 treatment of Renan's historical writing, and his arguments about the necessarily creative work of the historian in presenting their ideas.<sup>26</sup> Social reality is essentially fractured and without unity. How then to depict it?

By 1905, Sorel had come to believe that an objective social science could only be connected to social practice, and could never be predictive in the way that some sciences could be. Myth, at first simply a way of describing indeterminacy in the world, took on for Sorel ambiguities, as the fact of indeterminacy itself became of meaningful force. But the *form* of a given myth—like the form of scientific understanding—is drawn from practical life. For this reason, Sorel spends many pages in *Reflections* trying to demonstrate an identity between the revolutionary general strike, the basic tenets of Marxism, and the affective and practical life of the industrial workshop. This is because myths are supposed to emerge from productive life, and for that reason energize, we might say, individuals in ways that utopias, which are simply things a given individual has thought up, can never do.<sup>27</sup> Myth, a genuine movement from collective to individual, enables autonomy; utopia, which moves from the individual out to the collective, denies it.<sup>28</sup>

### III

The distinction between force and violence appears first in the context of a discussion of state intervention in labor disputes: “prefects, fearing that they may be obliged to use legal force against insurrectionary violence, bring pressure to bear on employers,” (61–62) thus resolving the conflict in favor of the workers.<sup>29</sup> Force is an act of authority, violence an act of revolt. But the distinction is immediately complicated: “the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The bourgeoisie have used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against the middle class and against the State by violence” (162; *Divenire* 35). Marxists, for various reasons—their deeply held utopianism in particular—“have never suspected ... that a distinction should be drawn between the *force* that aims at authority, endeavoring to

<sup>26</sup>On these passages, see Eric Brandom, “L’institution et l’esthétique: Sorel, Vico et Croce,” *Mil neuf cent: Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* 32 (2014): 17.

<sup>27</sup>For an argument connecting the Sorelian rhetoric of energy to larger movements in European thought, see Luke Collison, “Georges Sorel’s Political Energy,” *History of European Ideas* 47, no. 8 (2021): 17–18.

<sup>28</sup>The above presentation of myth leaves out an obvious reference—Henri Bergson. While there can be no denying the importance Sorel ascribed to Bergson in general—attending his lectures and praising him as one of the major thinkers of the era—in fact the meaning of the Bergsonian references in the *Reflections* is not so clear as it might at first appear.

<sup>29</sup>Without better information about, for instance, whether or not Sorel reviewed the Italian proofs before publication, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions from small differences between the Italian and later French editions of the text. Still, it is noteworthy that in the Italian version of this passage, the distinction is not yet made so clearly: “i prefetti paventano di dover ricorrere alla violenza legale contro la violenza insurrezionale, e fanno pressione sui padroni per forzarli a cedere ...” *Divenire sociale*, 16 October 1905, 314. When the text appeared in French a few months later, “la force legal” has replaced “violenza legale.” *Mouvement socialiste* 18, no 170 (1906): 29.

bring about an automatic obedience, and the *violence* that would smash that authority.” Or, in a usefully different contrast that gets at the same distinction, Sorel points out that the discipline with which a strike is maintained is not at all the same discipline that brings workers to attend carefully and scrupulously to their work.

Sorel had probably not formulated for himself the force/violence distinction while writing the first half of *Reflections*. He was working towards it rather than explaining it. The third chapter, entitled “Prejudices against Violence,” is evidence of this. The whole point of the chapter is to argue that there is a particular quality to the use of violence by the state—that abstracted and centralized power is particularly noxious and blood-thirsty, where the bottom-up and un-planned violence of the proletariat is restrained and ultimately socially useful. The chapter, this is to say, explores the idea that there are two kinds of violence without reference to the force/violence distinction. Only later, having arrived at the idea that the general strike could function as an interpretive and theoretical lens, was Sorel able to render this distinction philosophically explicit. In so doing, however, he smeared together—or confronted clearly the empirical fact of the confusion between—a moral universe dominated by production, and one dominated by resistance to statist abstraction. Both are generative of philosophical concepts, although one remains beholden to the non-generative abstraction, the non-freedom, of the state. Within Sorel’s idea of history, it remains the case that technical development in the means of production is the main driving force of historical change.

This has been, without a doubt, the most controversial of Sorel’s distinctions. Sorelian violence is, first, not a brief in favor of sabotage. Some other revolutionary syndicalists did approve of sabotage, but not Sorel. It is also not a defense of anarchist propaganda of the deed. Sorel had nothing but scorn for individualist anarchists, for bomb-throwing anarchists. Sorelian violence takes place within the collective frame of the labor dispute—ultimately class struggle. There, it has meaning and honor, and can be generative of the moral commitment that undergirds law. But if Sorel defends the honor of labor, and even still claims to be practically the only one who really takes law seriously, he has broken decisively with republican legality in favor of a new, emergent legality. Anti-Jacobinism was among Sorel’s most durable political commitments. For him, the French Revolutionary Terror is best understood as the application of juridical principles to politics—he is with Tocqueville here—the definition of political disagreement and conflict as punishable crime, as an injury to the sacred person of the nation. To say that force is what the state does, then, is to say that force is juridical. It imposes order, it places specific instances into general categories. It punishes and corrects. Violence does none of these things, but rather is—to borrow Walter Benjamin’s biblical language from his own recapitulation of Sorel’s distinction—the sign and seal of autonomy—of giving law to one’s self.<sup>30</sup>

Violence also has a function for Sorel in terms of the political balance of forces in the Third Republic. It is one way to defend liberty, to nurture a growing institution, so it requires that liberty already exist, that state force *not* be absolutely overwhelming. Violence can do the job Sorel assigns to it only within a liberal and broadly

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<sup>30</sup>See Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford, 2021).

representative, or at least responsive, state. In 1904 Jean Jaurès, perhaps Sorel's central enemy in *Reflections*, wrote about the terrible dangers that had been run by those socialist revolutionaries who thought they might achieve power through general Boulanger's coup: "Force is the night, it is the unknown." Jaurès concluded that it was better to walk in the full light of parliamentary deliberation and the legal power of representative democracy, and thus "to know one's self and to know the enemy."<sup>31</sup> For Sorel, the force/violence distinction attacks exactly this position. Force, disciplinary and disciplining force, always strengthens the state. Force is knowable—Marx understood much about it in *Capital*—and will bring only perversions of the revolution. Revolutionary activity must be violence against force. It must be a willing embrace of a future illegible to Jaurès' parliamentarism.

Indeed, the value of Sorelian violence is in part to provide the moral energy that will propel society into the unknown. Sorel had in 1903, in reference to the individual, identified such a telos for "liberalism," which "has as its foundation our ignorance of the future and has the goal of calling to life all our energies."<sup>32</sup> At issue in the *Reflections* is the *syndicat* as nascent or potential subjectivity. Thus excitement to action is not enough; revolutionary violence must also develop the logic of production. The function of violence within contemporary capitalist society is "to induce the workers to look upon economic conflicts as the reduced facsimiles of the great battle which will decide the future" (178). Here the *syndicat* is the embodied revolutionary subject, the hiatus of freedom that opens history into futurity: "the motive force of the revolutionary movement must also be the motive force of the ethic of the producers" (240). Violence emerges from the interstices of capitalism not as a hydraulic, emotive, reaction to capitalist exploitation, but as the social expression of the freedom capitalism requires in order to extract profit, but cannot permanently contain.

Violence, for Sorel, like all other forms of human activity, takes on meaning in historical context. This is not a banal point, because it has not been universally admitted. For instance, Simone Weil's extraordinary essay on the *Iliad* stands in stark contrast to Sorel's understanding of violence. For Weil, there is an essence to violence—although she uses the term 'force'—a special and inescapable logic that it imposes around itself. Violence, Weil argues, by nature makes people into things—the power of the *Iliad* as poem was to have recognized that the bronze spear turns he who wields it into a mere object just as well as he who is thrown down into the dust.<sup>33</sup> Sorel rejects this perspective totally. For Sorel, the Greek heroes, because of the institutions that shaped them, had no sense that they, even in their victory, were really victims. The gambit of the *Reflections* is that proletarian institutions are developed enough that violence against state force can, indeed, force a pluralization of the political sphere, and re-enforce the heroic commitment of individual proletarians to these institutions.

There is one thing that Sorel treats just as Weil treats violence—the state. In *Reflections*, everything that touches the state is emptied of its concrete reality, is

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<sup>31</sup>Jean Jaurès, *Discours parlementaires* (Paris: Cornély, 1904), 96.

<sup>32</sup>Georges Sorel, "Léon XIII," *Études socialistes* 1, no. 5 (1903): 272.

<sup>33</sup>Simone Weil, Rachel Bespaloff, and Christopher Benfey. *War and the Iliad*. Translated by Mary McCarthy (New York: NYRB Classics, 2005).

shut off from the future, rendered incapable of autonomy. In fact, over the course of the book, even those who strive most to resist the state are, as it were, contaminated and overthrown by it. Violence is not so historically or institutionally dense as the proletarian strike or even the myth. Because it is resistance to a state that Sorel sees as increasingly domineering and flatly rationalist, violence, too, becomes in the end, empty resistance. Autonomy, which in the revolutionary general strike is bound up in the technics of production, in violence becomes the simple refusal of the logic of the state. Autonomy, which for Sorel had always belonged with the individual in relation to a certain institution, always been won by the individual within a given institution, is emptied out. Autonomy too becomes the mirror of an idealized state and therefore, in principle, compatible with almost any kind of political dissent.

#### IV

This insight into Sorelian violence calls for connection to an anarchist tradition in thinking about violence, sociability, and the state. Certain moments in Sorel's *Reflections* are echoed by Pierre Clastres's notion of society against the state. Clastres himself directly inspired Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the war machine—one anthropologist making use of that concept also gives us this nearly-transcendental definition: "The State' is a hierarchical mode of organizing power that appears as a tendency or impulse throughout history."<sup>34</sup> Influential books by James C. Scott draw directly on Clastres and also rely on a certain abstracted and abstracting notion of the state. Sorel's scissionism became radical when he came to see the state in the way that Clastres and particularly Scott see the state: as an application—in a sense *the* application—of transcendent logic to concrete, messy, contingent reality. *Reflections on Violence* is at its core an account of what kinds of institutions might secure the moral freedom of the individual in the face of an increasingly powerful state. However, as Sorel became increasingly anxious about the power of State-directed rationalism, violence, as resistance to that State, took on its—falsely—ahistorical characteristics.<sup>35</sup>

Across *Reflections on Violence*, politics fades into the field of individual ethics. At the end of 1906, Sorel wrote a review of a text in which Edouard Dolléans—at the time a young historian of socialism, decades later a minister in the Popular Front government—had cited him in support of the idea that modern socialism is something like a replacement for religion. Sorel insisted that there was nothing necessarily religious about the idea of faith:

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<sup>34</sup>Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7. For a reading of Sorel through Deleuze, with a somewhat different angle on the question of the war-machine, see, Piotr Laskowski, "Georges Sorel, l'intempestif," *Mil Neuf Cent: Revue d'histoire Intellectuelle* 32 (2014): 147–80.

<sup>35</sup>For Clastres and Scott—and we can add David Graeber—revolution is really the extension of the egalitarian, communitarian, ambiguous, and plural spaces that typify, they believe, interpersonal interaction at its best. The State rationalizes. It makes visible and controllable, in so doing it creates usually pernicious hierarchies. Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale, 1998); *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale, 2009). Graeber writes about this at many places, but see especially "The Phenomenology of Giant Puppets."

'To take a side in social struggles is an act of faith [c'est faire acte de foi]... the republican who resisted the Second Empire had faith in the virtue internal to republican institutions, the legitimist believes that the prosperity of States depends on respect for the principles of heredity; and these things cannot be demonstrated. Each of us chooses one among the postulates and attaches ourselves firmly to it'.<sup>36</sup>

All sense of historical movement is gone here—leaving only existential commitment. The terms under which Sorel defends syndicalism have also undergone a distinct shift. He explicitly rejects the suggestion that “the proletariat can regenerate humanity” because of its status as the productive class. Rather, he says, “it is only because it is the only class currently possessed by a warlike spirit and, therefore, the only that is virile and capable of progress.”<sup>37</sup> Sorel reiterates his position, and in this reiteration there is an expansion of the field of myth,

the proletarian revolution appears to workers today as all great revolutions appeared to their proponents, as a drama the whole of which is clearly drawn. When we have to make decisions in everyday life [la vie commune] we also proceed by representing to ourselves the future in a dramatic form able to direct our feelings [sentiments]. These constructions are of the same nature as social myths, but they disappear quickly, while myths can acquire a solidity that gives them the appearance of historicity.<sup>38</sup>

The myth, then, is that ideal projection of a *self* into the future that overcomes both the dualism between free will and determinism (it shapes sentiments) and the dualism of the ideal and the material (it acquires solidity). Once the imperative of production drops out of Sorel's picture, and resistance to the state in the form of class struggle swallows the entire discursive space of revolution, the difference in kind between the individual worker and the institution of the syndicat dissolves. The syndicat has been reduced to an aggregation of abstracted individuals, has lost its institutionality.

## V

On May 3rd, 1906 Clemenceau, then Minister of the Interior, defended himself in a speech in Lyons regarding his conduct of the strike in the Pas-de-Calais. He had been attacked in particular, it seems, for preventing the police from properly defending themselves against the brutality of the striking miners. Clemenceau defended in turn the honor of the police. They had not given in to provocation, had maintained their honor by not firing back. No one wanted a massacre. Or almost no one; and so he came to the point. He explained that arrests made in the Pas-de-Calais had indicated the involvement there of people foreign not only to the area, but even to the world of labor itself. The police had had no choice but to investigate, and the prosecutor at Béthune found “items...from which clearly result, in conformity with instructions given earlier by M. le duc d'Orléans himself, a plan for the intervention of anti-Republican groups into the world of labor in order to stir up trouble from which will

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<sup>36</sup>Georges Sorel, “Le caractère religieux du socialisme,” *Le mouvement socialiste* 20, no. 180 (November 1906): 287–288.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 288.

result the re-establishment of the monarchy.<sup>39</sup> Strong stuff. However, this sensational monarchist plot to overthrow the republic by fomenting violent labor agitation seems to have been, indeed, totally fabricated. As Julliard writes, “of the plot, there was no longer any question a month later: the dossier of the prosecutor at Béthune ... was empty.”<sup>40</sup> The ploy and sweeping arrests nonetheless threw the ranks of the CGT into confusion and defused May Day. The stage was set for several years of confrontation between Clemenceau and Revolutionary Syndicalism, most famously during the strikes at Draveil and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. Government action there bore little relation to the “force without violence” of the Pas-de-Calais.<sup>41</sup>

The *Reflections* appeared finally as a book in 1908 in the midst of this conflict, and won for Sorel the attention of the literary world. By 1910, Sorel had publicly repudiated the Revolutionary Syndicalists (although not the proletariat as such), and lent his prestige to the right-wing, monarchist, antisemitic *Action française* newspaper. The alliance proposed by Clemenceau between the forces of monarchical reaction and labor thus became a sort of reality. It would be attempted in a more sustained way by intellectual representatives of both, most famously around the Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon (1912–1914). Here, Zeev Sternhell has influentially argued, was the origin, neither right nor left, of fascism.<sup>42</sup> Indeed Sorel, one of the protagonists of this left-right confusion, quoted Clemenceau in an early chapter of the *Reflections*: “Everything that lives resists; that which does not resist allows itself to be cut up piecemeal” (62). Clemenceau had meant to defend the “moral integrity” of France in the face of German aggression. Sorel translated the principle out of the realm of international relations and into that of relations between classes: violent self-defense was a necessary and legitimate element of any kind of life, biological or political. Sorel’s thought, in turn, was translated back out of class conflict and into the international realm by his readers in the interwar, most famously perhaps by Benito Mussolini.

## VI

Many of those involved at Courrières, even apparently the miners themselves, referred to Emile Zola’s 1885 *Germinal*—which depicts a bitter strike at a coal mine and features an apocalyptic flood caused by an anarchist—to describe the disaster. In the preparatory notes for this, his “socialist” novel, Zola explained that “the bourgeois reader must feel a shudder of terror” at the violence and “abominable savagery” of the workers out on strike.<sup>43</sup> Writing somewhat earlier, Niccolò Machiavelli had examined the historical record of the early Roman Republic and concluded that liberty grew out of and was defended by “events which terrify even those who read about them.”<sup>44</sup> In the years around 1900, leftists of different kinds advocated violence ranging from terrorism to sabotage. Sorel is unusual not in his embrace of violence from the left,

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<sup>39</sup>Georges Clemenceau *Journal Officiel*, May 5, 1906, 3137.

<sup>40</sup>Jacques Julliard, *Clemenceau, briseur de grèves: L'affaire de Draveil-Villeneuve-Saint-Georges*, (Paris: Julliard, 1965), 24.

<sup>41</sup>The phrase is from Roynette-Gland, “L’armée dans la bataille sociale.”

<sup>42</sup>Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in David Baguley, “*Germinal*: The Gathering Storm,” in Brian Nelson ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.

<sup>44</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Oxford: Oxford, 2003), 30.

but in the suggestion that labor conflict of the kind famously depicted in *Germinal* as terrifying, futile, debased, could have something like the effect that Machiavelli had observed. This means, importantly, *not* that like many Marxists he believed violence would ultimately be necessary for the proletariat to seize power, but rather that sometimes-violent social conflicts could have a positive effect on society as it already existed, could be both energizing and even *moralizing*. The state and the bosses used force to repress, the proletariat used violence to liberate, ultimately in the service of liberty.

The Sorel who sat down to write the *Reflections* had long argued that real revolution would mean the miners at Courrières in charge of their own labor, engaged as equals in the collective task of removing coal from the ground – but especially in the collective task of figuring out how to do that without putting themselves at the kind of terrible risk to which capitalist imperatives exposed them. Violence at the pit-heads was, Sorel then thought, defensive and perhaps ennobling, but only one side of the task. By the end of the *Reflections*, by 1907, commitment to defeating the forces of order, to beating Clemenceau's republic of *flics*, had become the only task.

Sorel himself, over the course of writing the *Reflections* and especially just after – partly perhaps in response to the defeat of syndicalism by Clemenceau – displaced the context that rendered his distinction between force and violence meaningful from the empirical social world into the individual moral one. He made it a matter of commitment, rather than history. In the 1970s, as part of his investigation of neo-liberalism, Michel Foucault announced famously that it was time to behead the state. Critical analysis, this is to say, ought not accept the hypostatization of sovereignty asserted by the Hegelian or Republican state. Sorel's intransigent turn was a failed attempt to behead the state. He made a mess of it, and his failure suggests potential consequences of other more recent failures. Sorel tread a dangerous line between enforcing liberal values through agonistic pluralism, and a mere ethic of commitment and authenticity. Sorel may help us even today to understand this territory, and in particular the role that violence, allowed to become a decontextualizing machine, can play in it.

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